

Forge Podcast with Kendell Kauffeldt.mp3

Peter Wooding: [00:00:06] Welcome to the Forge Leadership podcast this week. Simon Barrington is joined by Kendell Kauffeldt. Kendell is the Samaritan's Purse Country Director for Liberia in West Africa. Kendell led the organisation through its response to the Ebola crisis in 2014 and has lived in Liberia for nearly 13 years.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:27] Welcomes to the Forge Leadership podcast. Today we're joined by Kendell Kauffeldt. Kendell is the country director for Samaritan's Purse in Liberia. He and his wife Bev have been serving Christ in Liberia for over 12 years now. So Kendell welcome to the podcast.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:00:44] Thank you Simon. It's a joy to be with you. Just look forward to the conversation we're going to have.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:50] Fantastic and this sounds wonderful I can't believe I'm doing this from the UK to Liberia. The internet and connection sounds absolutely incredible. Now listen how does one become country director for Samaritans Purse in Liberia. What's been your your journey.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:01:08] So my journey is is one where it's interesting because God's hand has been in it and I just look back I can see that I I grew up as a missionary kid. My parents were missionaries in Southern Africa in Zimbabwe to be specific for thirty eight years and I left Africa in 1988 and being Canadian went back to Canada for schooling and met my wife and had no real thoughts or desires to get back to Africa. But through just a number of different circumstances particularly through my wife who felt the strong calling to work in this type of field - Disaster Relief Development humanitarian type of work. It was through her that she continued to pray that the Lord would call both of us to be able to work together.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:02:08] In the meantime I was a basketball coach. I mean that's really where I was groomed, if you want to put it that way, coaching Basketball at a university level followed by some production management but then the Lord through my wife revealed that this is what he was wanting us to be involved in for the next period was to work for an organisation that really had a mission statement that lined up with my desire to see a lasting eternal impact and came across Samaritan's Purse and applied for the Country Directors position and to be honest with you they took a risk in hiring me having no experience, very little education but by God's grace we've been able to serve, I've been able to serve in this role for over 12 years. So that's my journey to this position.

Simon Barrington: [00:03:12] And are there any similarities between what you do now and coaching a basketball team at a university level.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:03:19] Oh very much. You know it's amazing God, He just knew what he was doing and so for me when I came into coaching really every year it came down to what was our goal for the year, what were the players that I was able to recruit or were able to come and be part of the team and then figuring out what these individuals could do when they come together and work as a team towards a goal that we would set for the year. And so when I look back on that, that was just such a great place to learn leadership and that's really helped me in the leadership I do here with Samaritan's Purse in Liberia. I mean we have a vision we have a goal for a period of time and then as a leader it's my job to keep them on vision, understand the team that I am coaching to get to that vision and so to answer your question I am so thankful for the 10 years or so that I was involved in coaching. Because in essence that's what I am doing now in this role.

Simon Barrington: [00:04:35] Fantastic. Now over the 12 years you've been in Liberia what have

you grown to love about the country. Describe it for people who maybe have never been there never experienced West Africa. Describe it for us.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:04:49] So Liberia is on the west coast of Africa has four degrees above the equator. It's a small country. It only has four and a half million people. But has a very rich history and relationship to the United States through the slave trade and that period of history. It is a tropical rainforest so we have two seasons. We have a dry season and a rainy season and we get over 250 inches of rain a year. And so we experience a lot of bad roads, getting stuck in the mud and all those fun things. But the people of Liberia is what I've really come to love and the diversity is incredible. You know 4.5 million is really smallll, it's probably a little bit bigger now but that was the last census that we had. But yet in that there are 16 people groups that are very unique and have very unique traditions. And so the diversity is just it's incredible and I love it. It's a complex situation. So you have a country that has experienced a lot of traumatic history most notable you know was the civil crisis and some of the atrocities that happened with the war took place. And then more recently the Ebola crisis and when you layer that on top of the diversity and the structural challenges and infrastructural challenges. It's a complex place to work but yet there is an incredible potential and I think that's what the Lord just keeps bringing to my mind. In this complex, diverse, challenging there is potential and that potential is really what drives me to do what I do because these people that I've come to love are now my family and just I want to see them reach their potential which the foundation for me is found in Jesus Christ and we're able to get to that through the various projects that we do. So it's become home to me I love Liberia a lot.

Simon Barrington: [00:07:23] What was it like when you first arrived nearly 13 years ago now the civil war had just finished hadn't it. What conditions were you thrown in to as Samaritan's Purse in those early days.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:07:35] So we came about a year after the peace agreement was signed and at that point of the peace agreement being signed in 2003 Liberia was a completely failed state. There was no justice system in place. There was no banking system in place. There was no social infrastructure there was no education system in place it was literally a failed state. And so the Civil War took it to a place of Ground Zero. And I came into that situation about a year afterwards and so what I saw if I can remember back - its long time ago now but I just remember the destruction a lot of buildings the war ended with an urban conflict fighting happening in Monrovia so buildings were completely destroyed. The road system had not taken care of for 20 years and there was incredible pot-holes and just lack of usable roads. I remember that. But there is a memory in my mind of just the trauma that resulted in conflicts being solved through violence. I just remember driving into town and if there was ever an incident it would be a quick it would quickly flare up and it would be violent and that was just how old Liberians survived during those you know years of war that's that's what I remember. So it was no electricity and 2005, no running water everything was generators and wells and all that stuff. It was an adventure.

Simon Barrington: [00:09:28] I remember coming around there and spending some time with you and staying in one of the nicest hotels in Monrovia that had no running water and a generator that kept tripping out. I remember that well. But how did Samaritan's Purse go about its work back in those days and what kind of programs have you been involved in over the years and what kind of change has that brought about for the people of Liberia.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:09:51] So initially when we came there was very little that was active in Samaritan's Purse. And so we immediately just was able to see where the needs were and we saw a great need particularly with the children that had been involved in being used as child soldiers and so we got quickly involved with UNICEF and protection programs and rehabilitation of the child soldiers. And while that was going on I knew that we needed to get involved with the church

because it was my I knew quickly that the church was really going to be the network that was going to be able to sustain any thing which started long term. And so we started to really look into to the church and so we started working initially you were part of this initial work with HIV and AIDS. And then quickly realised that the Church's had gone through the same destruction and so we did a lot of work initially re-building churches and because the population had been so displaced, and so many had lost their lives, there was a need to get involved quickly and to do Pastor and Church leader training. And so that's where we got involved. And quickly realized that as people were returning back to their places that they had left, there was a need to help them with livelihoods and get them back on their feet. So we started working in agriculture and animal husbandry and then you know just continue to grow from that point. So that was the initial work that we did when we came in in 2005 that just continued to grow. And God blessed us with resources and grants through various agencies and then through that we never lost the focus of the church remained vital to what we were doing and the need for the Gospel to really provide that healing and hope for the population that had come out of you know years and years of civil crisis.

Simon Barrington: [00:12:11] Have you got a favourite story of maybe a village that's been impacted or a an area the country that's been really impacted by your consistent work over there over that period of time.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:12:24] You know the Lord guides us and I'm grateful for that. When we came into Liberia in 2005 I was new to this type of work and really found myself tripping over other organisations and I went down to the U.N. who was able to provide me with a map of where people are or where organisations were working and my desire was to get as far away as possible. And so the Lord led us to particular place in the north west called Foya which is right where the three countries of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia come together and there was no other organisation working up there and I said to my staff of 4 or 5 at that point - this is where we need to go work. And that has really proven to be something that Lord let us do because the history of Samaritan's Purse work in Liberia has really been to His glory a success in that district. And then of course when we got into the Ebola crisis the Lord had us right there at the onset of it because of that. And so just that whole district comes to my mind as a story of complete destruction but through the church rehabilitating the churches reconstructing them working with the pastors doing our program through the churches in that area. You know there's many times I go visit and I go through a village and I see the church as a central point of that village and out of that has come you know restoration for those village so that's what comes to my mind when you ask a question about a story, it's really a broad story but it's about God leading us to where he wants to use us even though we don't know how he's going to use us and in faith stepping out and doing that and you know He's faithful.

Simon Barrington: [00:14:33] Wow. Kendell, that's amazing. How would you describe your own personal approach to leadership. It's a question I like to ask everyone who I interview on this podcast. How would you describe that. Are there certain things you've learnt about leading that have just become part of your core DNA and how do you lead spiritually as well.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:14:55] I mean leadership is something that I absolutely love to study in and I'm learning. My <y approach to leadership is changing over time and I think that's healthy. But when I think of that the first thing that comes to my mind is that I understand that outside of God and His Holy Spirit as a leader I would be very ineffective. And so I think my approach to leadership starts at a position of humility and realisation of the need for God and His Holy Spirit to help me. And then it quickly moves in to this area of vision and I just I've just seen in our work here in Liberia the incredible unifying factor that a vision can provide to an office which results in just you know things getting done. And so I. I believe strongly in creating and committing to a vision. Then I would move to developing the team around you and again I just see that through my

coaching and when I look at the work we've been able to accomplish here and it's because of the team and so just investing in your staff realising that that's an incredible asset and as a leader once you've set that vision I believe then your job is to develop that team to put the right people around you and then give them the freedom to do what they need to do. Leadership is, at that point, it's critical to trust them, to empower them, to free them up to do the work and then to be there to guide and make sure they stay on vision and correct where needed.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:16:52] But God has gifted so many people that are brought into our lives as leaders we need to honour the Lord by giving those that have gifts the opportunity to use them. Then lastly it's bringing it back to vision communication and then I just have this big word prayer. There's just a lot of prayer that's needed in terms of my approach to leadership, in terms of spiritually leading. This is something I've been thinking about recently as I've taken on some mentoring. You know mentoring is something that's talked about a lot. It's something that I haven't done a lot of and now I'm starting to do more of it and I just see the necessity to shoot think through what does it mean to spiritually lead. And for me Simon, the first thing comes to mind is that I will only lead spiritually as much as my spiritual walk or growth or journey is progressing.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:18:01] And so when I think about spiritual leadership it's almost like the focus has come back on me and what I am doing to ensure my spiritual vitality. I mean there are lots of analogies you know have been used in the past. But when I look and evaluate my own leadership when my leadership is depressed it's oftentimes because of my spiritual walk is depressed out of lack of discipline or devotion or communion with God. So my take on it is that you know if I am committed to be spiritually vital the natural outpouring is going to be a very spiritual leadership. And that puts a lot of onus on me to make sure that that is happening. You know other things that come to my mind in terms of spiritual leadership is that for me is that are outcome our goal our vision is spiritual. So as an office our vision is to see lives transformed through the gospel, Church's strengthened through partnerships and communities improved through our projects. And so having a spiritual vision requires spiritual leadership. And so I just mulling those things in my mind. I have a long way to go in this area but that's what comes to my mind.

Simon Barrington: [00:19:27] Just fantastic. A number of leaders as I've asked them those questions have said about how the biggest challenge for leaders right now is leading themselves. That actually it starts with us leading ourselves it starts with our own spiritual disciplines. So I love what you're saying there about humility and about leading yourself and about discipline.

Simon Barrington: [00:19:48] Now a few years back Liberia made the news because of the Ebola crisis. A huge crisis that was on the news in the UK and around the world with many thousands of people dying and a huge crisis that hit Liberia and you were right in the middle of that and caught right in the middle of that. Talk me through how you became involved in that crisis and what Samaritan's Purse role was in responding to Ebola.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:20:21] Yes going back to God leading up to the north west of the country to Foya. The case Number One of the whole outbreak took place less than 10 kilometres from where we were working in Foya.

Simon Barrington: [00:20:37] Wow.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:20:37] And so when you look back I just see the Lord having us in the right place. I received a phone call from our base manager a Liberian gentleman and he phoned me and I was having dinner and he just said Kendell there are Ebola patients in Foya. I mean that's that's how it came to us. It was just it was a shock at that point. My mind ran to you know there is no Ebola in Liberia it's in Rwanda and Uganda. And that's generally where it's always been this

can't be true. But obviously it did happen and was there and so the initial wave happened right around our base and so on you know we were thrown right into it and then that seemed to stop. We thought it was over and then it picked up again and just escalated to what we saw and you know. We saw just like you said thousands of people losing their lives to this incredibly horrific disease. When the second wave started it was already well on its way, the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone and Guinea and now was flaring in Liberia. At that point the only organization that really respond to Ebola was Doctors Without Borders, Medicin San Frontier and they approached us as an organization and said we cannot respond in Liberia we're stretched. Will you take on the clinical response in Liberia. Of course at that point Samaritan's Purse had never done that. So having obviously that decision was made at a much higher level of headquarters and Samaritan's Purse agreed that if Doctors Without Borders, Medicine Sans Frontiers would train us in the protocols then we would take on the response clinically responding to that outbreak and that's what we did. And so we ran the Ebola treatment unit in Foya and then Ebola spread into the urban center of Monrovia.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:22:45] And so we then partnered with SIM at their hospital here in Monrovia we partnered with them to set up the first Ebola treatment unit from Monrovia which quickly got overrun. So we built a second one which quickly got overrun and then there was a third one and so we were involved clinically in responding and so at that point all our projects had stopped. And so that's that's how it came to us in terms of us being involved in Ebola.

Simon Barrington: [00:23:16] Now 2 Samaritan's Purse doctors contracted Ebola and I know your staff were right in the centre of that crisis with. We saw the pictures of of riots happening in Monrovia. We saw Samaritan's Purse staff who had Ebola been evacuated out and back to the States and miraculously recovering. That that must have been an extremely testing and trying time for you and the team. Describe to us a little bit what that was like and how you got through that as a leader. I can't imagine myself even being in that situation. Talk to us about that.

Simon Barrington: [00:23:55] When I look back on it Simon, it was the most stretching difficult fear filled time in my life. I mean Ebola is such a horrific disease and then you know my staff were coming to work and having to take a risk every day coming to work not knowing who is in the taxi with them were they Ebola positive the you know getting here to our office where the units were and people lined up outside and were dying on the street because there was no room in the units. And my staff were coming through that and just being a leader in that time. It was more than challenging. In actual fact to be totally honest with you there was a point where I had to remove myself as a leader. Looking back I learned a good lesson through that. You know there's times where you've got to lead and you've got to be stretched and you've got to beyond what you think you can do but then there are times when you as a leader need to realise that you've been stretched too far and now you know somebody else needs to come in and do it. Just realising the limitations you have. I think that's a key thing that I learnt through it. But how did I get through it? I mean obviously it was through prayer. There were many days where we would sit in our office and this had never happened in the world before so nobody knew what to do so it wasn't like you could turn to the textbooks or what have you. But it came down to to knowing that literally hundreds of thousands of people were praying for us and that was a powerful thought to know. I remember having a team around me that I just sat with in crisis making those decisions you have to rely on people you have trusted in the past. So just looking at the group around me knowing that I have been with these leaders I can trust them. Coming up with the you know a collaborative solution you know was not going to be possible by myself. And you need that. And I think the last thing that I keep on going back to even though I didn't know this was happening but there was a lot of preparation that was being done for my team and for me as a leader that made us effective initially in the crisis and so the thought that I think about is that leadership preparation crisis has to happen outside a crisis. And if you get into a crisis and you haven't done the necessarily preparation you

know leadership is a lot more challenging at the point. But Simon, I mean there were days when I wondered you know you sit there and think maybe I have Ebola or you'd look at your staff and wonder who's going to you know who's next. To just motivate the staff to keep working even in these you know extreme conditions really the Lord helped me through that and learnt a lot through it.

Simon Barrington: [00:27:34] Now many people would find themselves in that kind of situation would not blame you for coming out of it and wouldn't blame you for not going back either. And yet you and your wife Bev have gone back to Liberia and rebuilt the work of Samaritan's Purse there over the last couple years. What's the re-entry process been like for you into Liberia and the recovery process what was that like as well after going through such a difficult crisis together.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:28:10] Yeah. You know I'm thankful for Samaritan's Purse and they saw the need to help us and they provided a lot of support. Personally I just remember that when I left I knew that I had to come back I couldn't leave and not return just because of how much I had come to love my staff and the work that they were doing here but I also realised that I am to heal sufficiently to come back and lead. And so that's different for each person. So my wife she was ready to come back within six weeks and she came back within six weeks and continue to respond. For me it took quite a bit longer. It took about eight months to where I could honestly before the Lord say I'm ready to go back and lead you know during that eight months there was a lot of healing that had to take place. So I think it's individual in terms of their response to getting well enough to get back in and lead. But when I came back it was an incredible joy to be with my staff and to God's glory not one of my 350 staff contracted Ebola outside of Dr Kent Brantly and Nancy Writebol who worked for SIM. But my national staff who were out there not in protective equipment but doing what was needed to try and get us through that. The Lord just spared them and so coming back in was a great time of joy and celebration. Ebola prevented us from touching each other and so when it was done to be able to hug my staff it really was incredible. And really that set the stage for the next phase of our office. We didn't try to go back to what we were doing before. We just you know looked and knew that there was a lot of work that needs to be done in terms of Ebola recovery particularly in the area of trauma. And so that has become a focus of ours in terms of working with communities, that lost you know half of their community. So coming in as a leader is a joy. But then just resetting the areas of focus that's still reached that vision is where we find ourselves today.

Simon Barrington: [00:30:46] Fantastic Kendell is there anything that you've done. Anything you've put into practice to build your own inner resilience as a result of going through the Ebola crisis. Lots of leaders talk to me about the need to build inner strength for when their crises come. Is there anything that you now do that you weren't doing before that you know people could pick up on and from someone who's been through a crisis like that. Are there things that you do differently now.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:31:17] What comes to my mind is discipline. I've just realised that the necessity of discipline as a leader. And so during peace or quiet times is when you have to be most disciplined in terms of building yourself spiritually in your communion and relationship with God in using that time to strengthen your leadership in terms of reading and engaging with others to pour into you and pouring into others so that you can be poured into more. It's that discipline to do those things when there is not crises that I have learnt and you know if the Lord wishes I feel more prepared for the next crisis than I definitely would have found myself before going into Ebola.

Simon Barrington: [00:32:13] Well Kendall thank you so much for sharing that story with us. You know I've been so impressed by the work of Samaritan's Purse in Liberia over the years and your

leadership of the team through that crisis of Ebola and your willingness to go back and serve the people of Liberia.

Simon Barrington: [00:32:33] Thanks for joining us today on the podcast. But just as we finish what are you hopeful for now for the people of Liberia as you look forward.

Simon Barrington: [00:32:41] Yeah. Hope can only be found in Jesus Christ. And so my hope is that God will use me and our organization through whichever means he has to share the good news that is found in Jesus Christ that provides that hope. And then my hope is for leadership. You know we're currently going through the election process here in Liberia and the potential is often stunted because of poor leadership. And so I just pray for good leadership at all levels. So for Liberians can just experience the hope that can be found. So those are the there are two things that come into my mind.

Simon Barrington: [00:33:30] Fantastic. Kendall thank you so much for joining us today. And may God bless you and all the fantastic work you're doing there in Liberia.

Kendell Kauffeldt: [00:33:37] Thank you Simon.

Peter Wooding: [00:33:39] Thanks for listening. Each week we bring informative encouraging and challenging interviews with leaders around the world on issues of character integrity and identity. You can subscribe on iTunes by searching for Forge Leadership podcast or by visiting www.forge-leadership.com